

# Voters' Ed

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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

New York Times

April 6, 2006

Washington

HIGH school seniors already have a lot on their minds: SAT's, college acceptance letters, job applications. But our democracy should demand something else of these 18-year-olds: that they prepare to cast their first-ever vote in this fall's Congressional elections.

Unfortunately, all too many young people will graduate from high school without registering to vote and without even taking a class on the basics of voting. We need a new "leave no voter behind" policy.

There is precedent for us to build on. In 1993, Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act, which promoted voter registration at motor vehicle and social service agencies. A recent survey by the federal Election Assistance Commission measured steady increases in voter registration since passage of the law.

Still, only 72 percent of eligible citizens were registered to vote in 2004, according to the Census Bureau. And the registration rate among 18- to 24-year-olds was a dismal 58 percent, which helps explain why voter turnout for this age group in the presidential election was far below the national average. That's simply unacceptable.

We propose automatic voter registration for all high school seniors; our goal is the registration of all eligible students before they graduate.

This approach would be a change from relying on private, nonprofit organizations to register most voters. But it's a change worth making. High schools, after all, are the ideal environments in which to introduce young Americans to voting and to impress upon them the importance of active participation in our democratic system.

Some jurisdictions have, in fact, already taken steps to establish school-based voter registration programs. In New York City, public high school graduates get registration forms with their diplomas. Hawaii allows citizens to pre-register at 16, making it easier to achieve 100 percent student registration. And in Vermont, Secretary of State Deborah L. Markowitz has designated a "high school voter registration week."

Many high schools require students to fulfill a certain number of community service hours to graduate. Under our plan, that community service could include working in election offices. The hope here is that we would be training the next generation of election administrators and, equally important, providing poll workers who are comfortable with computers — a desirable qualification given our increasingly modern voting systems.

Finally, high school government or civics classes should not only explain to students how to vote in their community but also emphasize the value of lifelong voter participation.

Some election officials might worry that automatic voter registration would create more work. But systematically registering students in classes would decrease the number of errors on registration forms, teach students about how best to change their addresses and get absentee ballots, and ease the burden of processing new registrations near Election Day. New statewide voter registration lists should also help reduce the likelihood of duplicate names. Ultimately, election officials would save time and money.

Of course, voter registration is no guarantee of turnout, but it is the first — and often, most difficult — step. There is perhaps no better place to begin this critical task than our high schools. By improving our registration and education efforts, we will not only help protect the voting preferences of younger Americans but the long-term vitality of our participatory democracy. Let's not leave any voters behind.

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